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'People think we're scum'
The battle to save Britain's
biggest traveller community



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columns

PHOTO STORY
The battle for Dale Farm

Their families have *lived* in this corner of *Essex* for five *decades*. Now they are being *forced out*. So why is no one *fighting* for their rights?

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSH COLE
REPORT BY EMILY DUGAN

I'VE GOT YOUR BACK Like all of the 96 families living at Dale Farm, Gabrielle (left) and Shannon Egan must rely on each other if they are to escape eviction



PHOTO STORY
The battle for Dale Farm



The entrance to Dale Farm looks more like a fortress than a settlement these days. The largest traveller site in Europe, which sits on the outskirts of Basildon, is preparing for its biggest stand-off yet.

The makeshift village of 96 families, around since the 1960s, faces the imminent threat of being destroyed. Using scaffolding, piled-up tyres and razor-wire, its occupants have drawn up the battle lines at its entrance. "WE WON'T GO" reads the banner set against the grey Essex sky.

The battle for this land is set to begin next month, and will be watched closely by the 300,000 or so traditional travellers estimated to be living in the UK today: it comes at a time when travellers and Romany gypsies say they are feeling more marginalised than ever by public attitudes and Government policy.

Travellers are used to persecution in Britain: in the 16th century, laws were passed in England condemning gypsies to death if they did not give up their wanderings, and land legislation until the late 18th century ensured that they were housed off sites.

Now travellers believe the tide is turning against them once more. Since coming into power the Coalition has reversed a series of measures which sought to combat prejudice and facilitate the settlement of travellers on authorised sites. Gypsy History Month, which was

THE FAMILY THAT PRAYS
TOGETHER *A home*
on the Dale Farm site.
Opposite page, Margaret
Flynn and her son Dan



introduced by the Labour Government in 2007, had its funding cut in the first Coalition budget; the Gypsy and Traveller Sites Grant, which provided £96m to local authorities to build new sites for settlements has also been ended, along with the Regional Spatial Strategy, which impelled local authorities to assess the settlement needs of local traveller communities and provide the requisite number of pitches.

This month the Government announced it would be using the new Localism Bill to bring in legislation that will make it harder for residents to continue living at long-standing traveller sites. Environment secretary Caroline Spelman said the Localism Bill will "bring about fairness between the settled and travelling communities" by making provision for authorised sites. But travellers are sceptical of the development, which means they are unable to obtain planning permission after they have set up camp.

"For the past 500 years the state has tried to legislate us out of existence. This takes us right back," says Jake Bowers, a Romany journalist and editor of *Travellers' Times* magazine. "It's a bigots' charter. If you give local people decisions over who lives in their area, the monoculture already there will not allow there to be a multicultural. The English countryside has become a monoculture of rich, middle-class white people. Now they're the local people, they will not allow people from other cultures to come in. We're slipping back to the time of the Enclosures Act of the 1700s, when

gypsies were marginalised. But if the Enclosures Act didn't get rid of us, Caroline Spelman hasn't got a chance."

"The Government telling local communities they can make the planning decisions they want would be terrible news for gypsies," adds Dr Robert Home, an expert in UK traveller and gypsy communities from Anglia Ruskin University, "because local residents are likely to object to any sites. People don't want gypsies around."

IT SEEMS the public appetite for the portrayal of travellers as exotic outsiders is as strong as ever - Channel Four's tactfully named series *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* is currently a ratings hit. But photographer Josh Cole is trying to do something different. For the past five years he has been working on a series of photographs called "Gypsies Not Tramps or Thieves", aimed at showing the everyday lives of travellers and illustrating that in many ways their lives are not so different from any other Britons.

"I was intrigued because when I was a kid growing up in Leves near Brighton, there were a lot of gypsies staying near us and there was this aura about them of hard men you don't muck around with," says Cole. "There was always this feeling that if you did go to the sites, you'd get into trouble or into a fight."

Cole has come to Dale Farm to make a record of the lives of those waiting to see if they will lose their homes for

'For the past 500 years the state has tried to legislate us out of existence. This new Bill takes us right back. It's a bigots' charter'



'All the camps that we used to go to have been razed to the ground, so where would we go? All my family is here'

ever. One of the families he has worked with is the McCarthys. Mary-Ann McCarthy has lived on Dale Farm in a chalet for the past nine years and is happy to remain in the one place for the first time in her life. The 69-year-old explains: "All the camps that we used to go to have been razed to the ground now, so where would we go? All my family is here: my seven children, 20 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. This is the first time in my life that I've been settled. Before this, I travelled my whole life in a horse-drawn cart, but I can't go back on the road now - it'd be too hard. For the bulldozers to come and just kick us out, I can't imagine it. They should have a heart."

The row with the council affects around half of those living on the site, who do not have planning permission to do so. Gypsies and travellers have lived in one section of Dale Farm legally since the 1960s but since then more and more people have joined them on neighbouring land and the community now stands at around 1,000 people.

After a legal battle that went all the way to the Law Lords last year, and failed, the residents have exhausted their legal means of resistance. That does not mean they won't try other methods to keep the homes that some have lived in, albeit illegally, for decades. Basildon Council is required to give 28 days' notice for an eviction. As soon as notice is served, which is expected any day, the residents will be doing everything they can to prepare for a fight. Violence



is anticipated, and it has been estimated that it could cost £13m to evict families from the site.

Mary-Ann's 24-year-old granddaughter, Maggie McCarthy, has a four-month-old baby, Jasmine. She is worried that - like her - Jasmine will be unable to get a proper education if they are moved off the site. At the moment, many children are taught at the local primary school, but without an address and a permanent home it will be tough to get her through school. "I never had an education and I want her to get on. I want to stay here for her sake as much as anything."

Maggie's 20-year-old brother, Jim McCarthy, says: "If they come with bulldozers, we'll have to fight. We can't give up on our homes." His older brother John agrees, adding half-jokingly: "I'll do anything to keep this place: petrol bombs, hand-grenades, whatever I can get my hands on."

A group of primary-school-age boys gathered at the razor-wired entrance take it in turns to skid around on a bike, nipped at the ankles by a pack of small dogs. They are no less vociferous in their opposition to the impending bulldozers than their elders. As one nine-year-old says, "We'd put up a fight. If anyone came here with bulldozers we'd sink a fucking bat in their head."

But James O'Leary, who has been coming and going from the site "since it was first here", is not holding out much hope that anyone will help them stay. "No one will care we're losing our homes because people think we're scum." •

SETTLED AT LAST
Opposite page, from bottom left, Mary-Ann McCarthy, who has lived at Dale Farm for nine years with family including grandson John and great-granddaughter Jasmine. Above, the traveller community makes clear its determination to fight